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TAGS: MO PBTS PHUM PREL

SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: PREPARING THE GOM FOR AUTONOMY
AND NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE POLISARIO

REF: RABAT 333

Classified By: DCm Wayne Bush for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In meetings with the MOI and MFA on February 17 in Rabat, and reiterated during the embassy's February 22 meeting with MFA SecGen Omar Hilale, visiting NEA/MAG Office Director William Jordan urged GOM officials to be expansive in their thinking on autonomy to make it real and credible to the Sahrawi people. He emphasized Morocco should be prepared to negotiate with the Polisario. Jordan assured the GOM that the US shared the view held by many countries that an independent state in the Western Sahara was likely unviable and that a more realistic settlement was one that accorded the Sahrawis a significant measure of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. In light of increased international attention focused on the response by Moroccan security services to demonstrations and arrests of Sahrawi activists, he urged the GOM to allow greater access to the territory to counter the impression that the GOM "has something to hide." Jordan told his contacts that he would be traveling to Tindouf the following week and would use any meetings with the Polisario to press for serious contacts with the Moroccans and agreement to negotiate with Morocco without preconditions. MOI Governor Rachid Rguibi said there was already considerable Sahrawi involvement in local affairs in the territory. He stressed that Morocco had a vision for the territory and was ready and eager for a negotiated solution to the conflict -- but was Algeria? End Summary.

¶2. (C) On February 17, NEA/MAG Office Director William Jordan had separate meetings with Governor Rachid Rguibi, a member of the MOI's brain trust on the Western Sahara; MFA Bilateral Affairs Director Youssef Amrani; and MFA Director of American Affairs Salahuddin Tazi. While the meetings with the MFA covered other issues in the US-Morocco bilateral relationship (reftel), the 75-minute meeting with Rguibi focused exclusively on the Western Sahara. Polcouns accompanied Jordan to the Rguibi meeting, and DCM, Polcouns, and Poloff joined Jordan for the two MFA meetings.

Western Sahara: Autonomy, Image, and the Polisario

¶3. (C) Rguibi told Jordan by way of context that efforts to decentralize nationally were well underway in Morocco -- not

just in the Western Sahara. Autonomy for the Western Sahara was now an accepted idea, even though "there are those in Morocco who fear it." Spain provided the "closest" model to what Morocco was considering, though there were "some tendencies" in Catalonia that "cause concern" for Morocco. Rguibi noted that in 2000 Morocco committed to James Baker to accept autonomy, and at that point autonomy in the Western Sahara became part of a national plan for decentralization.

¶4. (C) Rguibi said Moroccan academics and political parties, among others, had taken up the King's December 2005 call for consultations and sharing of ideas on the Western Sahara. "The King wants the search for the right solution to be appropriated by the people," he said. Rguibi argued that there was "nothing" in the south when the Spanish left the territory; there were just some army barracks and nomads, and over the years the GOM had made huge strikes in developing the territory.

¶5. (C) Rguibi said Morocco's thinking on autonomy was no secret to the US, as then-MOI Sahel had brought Morocco's

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autonomy plan to the US in late 2003. Morocco saw the process toward a solution as a negotiation, based on "courageous principles," essentially between two parties: Morocco and Algeria. Rguibi wondered whether Algeria was really ready to engage in a serious way with Morocco to find a solution.

¶6. (C) Rguibi stressed that independence was an "unthinkable" option for Morocco. US pressure on Algeria to drive home that point was essential. Independence was ethnically and politically impossible for the Sahrawi people, "even for me as a Sahrawi." Rguibi said he was glad that the US was interested in and knowledgeable about the Western

Sahara issue. Morocco, moreover, deeply appreciated the US role in facilitating the release of the remaining Moroccan POWs in August 2005.

¶7. (C) Rguibi identified a census of the Tindouf camps as another priority for the GOM and expressed appreciation for previous US support for this initiative in Geneva. More pressure on UNHCR to follow through was necessary, he said; a census would allow the international community to know the real population of the camps. But Algeria defies the international community and refuses a census, he charged, and there was no real cooperation between Algeria and UNHCR.

¶8. (C) Morocco's other concern with the Western Sahara, Rguibi said, was to ward off potential terrorism emanating from the Sahel region. As the US and western Europe well knew, much of the Sahel was a no-man's land, and what happened there in terms of security could have an effect on the west. Afghan Arabs could re-group in the ungoverned spaces; there had already been kidnappings of westerners in Algeria; there was clandestine migration of nationals from west Africa and all the way from South Asia. Every time the GOM intercepted migrants, others followed. Migrants transit the Sahel and the Western Sahara to get to Europe. This works against western interests.

¶9. (C) Rguibi summed up by saying the situation boiled down to this: was Algeria ready for a definitive political solution to the conflict? Stability in the Maghreb was important. A militarized Polisario was a threat to Morocco; this was the subject of FM Benaissa's recent letter to the UNSYG Annan (concerning Polisario activity in Tifariti). The Polisario was asserting itself along the Mauritanian border in areas MINURSO could not reach, where there few inhabitants and no government control. Moreover, to celebrate SADR independence later this month, the Polisario would bring in supporters from Mauritania, violating the ceasefire and the military agreements.

¶10. (C) Jordan responded that an independent state in the Western Sahara was not conceivable to the US and much of the

international community, primarily because such a state was not likely to be viable. A mutually agreed solution offering real autonomy, in which Sahrawis can realize self-determination in the context of Moroccan sovereignty, was the preferred solution. The US believed this was attainable. Presentation by Morocco of an autonomy plan to the Secretary Council was the next step. With the definitive end of the Baker process, diplomacy on the Western Sahara had entered a new phase. UN Envoy Van Walsum would soon issue a report on the situation. A new formula was necessary for moving forward, with the support of the international community and the Friends of the Western Sahara. The US looked forward with eagerness to Morocco's autonomy plan so the focus could shift to negotiations. Morocco's autonomy plan should consider all the aspects of autonomy, encompassing the support of the Sahrawi people.

¶11. (C) Jordan said a concern for the US was that the demonstrations in the territory -- whether supported or motivated by the Polisario, or whether a reflection of the conditions in the territory -- gave the impression that the Sahrawis were being marginalized. Jordan said it was not for him to pronounce on the underlying factors, but the international community was interested in the question. The US reviewed reports from NGOs, its embassies, and others to develop an accurate picture of the situation in the Sahara. For a durable end to the conflict, a solution needed to pass through the inhabitants of the territory.

¶12. (C) Jordan agreed that Algeria had to be fully involved in the search for a solution. Without Algeria, there would be no lasting solution, and no pressure on the Polisario to engage. The US encouraged Morocco to have direct contact with the Polisario or the real representatives of the Sahrawi people. The US could not envisage a tangible solution without that. The Maghreb region needed real integration and cooperation to realize the objectives of the Arab Magreb Union. But integration had little chance without a solution to the Maghreb's central problem. The US was concerned about

provocative Polisario activities in what it called the "liberated zone" east of the berm, although there was not an abundance of information available about what was actually going on and whether it violated the 1991 cease-fire agreement.

¶13. (C) Jordan told Rguibi he would be visiting the camps in Tindouf the following week and would probably have contact with the Polisario. He would stress US concern about activities that destabilize the region and note the only way forward is through diplomacy. The Polisario needed to consider very seriously, despite its public rejection, the Moroccan proposal on autonomy. The US was prepared to assist negotiations provided the Polisario agreed to reach a solution peacefully. Similarly, in meetings with the GOA, Jordan told Rguibi he would tell the Algerians frankly they could not opt out. A durable solution required the full participation of Algeria.

¶14. (C) Rguibi said the US vision was encouraging to Morocco, and he hoped the US would help the parties find a solution as quickly as possible. He wanted to be clear about several points concerning the situation in the "south," however. Morocco had spent the last twenty-five years developing the Western Sahara. The territory enjoyed the lowest unemployment in the country. There were ports, airports, and good roads. There was massive immigration from the north to the south. The Western Sahara enjoyed the most ambitious development projects in Morocco, and the GOM was very satisfied with the progress achieved so far. There was greater freedom of expression in the Sahara now. "Separatists" meet with US officials without repercussions or arrests. Yet, some Sahrawis burn the Moroccan flag. Moroccans are not used to that. It's a provocation. Some people in the territory act on instruction from the Polisario. The Polisario is against national development plans in Morocco. When people engage in violence and swear allegiance to the Polisario, then the GOM must be concerned.

When that happens, the Polisario becomes a militant movement.

Our people cannot accept that, Rguibi insisted. Fourteen Sahrawi activists had been sentenced recently for their role in demonstrations. The process was transparent. The brother of Polisario leader Abdulaziz lives in Morocco -- he is left alone. Delegations travel to the Western Sahara all the time, but when they arrive waving the Polisario flag, that's a provocation. It's not the central government that takes action, Rguibi said, but rather the mayor of Laayoune who decides how to handle the situation.

¶15. (C) The Moroccan government, Rguibi said, has gone very far in expanding liberties in the Western Sahara and elsewhere in Morocco. The King was going as far as possible. It was unacceptable that people should provoke those Sahrawis who have made the choice to be Moroccan. Thirty-one Sahrawis were members of the Moroccan parliament -- more than eleven percent of the seats. Most of the mayors in the Sahara are Sahrawis. Sahrawis are integrated into political and economic life throughout Morocco -- in Settat, in Larache, in the banks, in the regional investment centers. I myself, Rguibi said, am a Sahrawi who was a counselor to the two prime ministers before coming to the Ministry of Interior.

¶16. (C) Rguibi closed with an anecdote. He had been in Laayoune for the funeral of a Sahrawi man last November. As the funeral cortege wound through Laayoune, there was an accident and three pedestrians were killed. The next day the Algerian press and the Polisario were proclaiming this a politically motivated killing. Such exploitation was dangerous for an accurate understanding of the Western Sahara. Yes, the period May through July 2005, with numerous demonstrations, had been difficult, Rguibi admitted. A Sahrawi man had been killed in October during demonstrations.

This was a mistake, and the offending officers had been arrested. Security officials are under strict orders to avoid confrontations with demonstrators.

Meetings with the MFA

¶17. (C) During a brief meeting, Jordan reiterated key points to Youssef Amrani, MFA Director of Bilateral Affairs, noting that the Department is "waiting with impatience" for Morocco's autonomy proposal. He stressed that the Western Sahara is at the forefront of how Morocco's image is perceived by the international community, and it is imperative that Morocco allow access to the Western Sahara. Jordan said it is inevitable the Polisario will have a seat at the negotiating table and Morocco will have to engage the Polisario. Amrani replied that Morocco is no stranger to the Polisario because the GOM has negotiated with the Polisario in the past. Amrani said the problem is Algeria does not allow the Polisario to act independently. In this regard, dealing with Algeria is "unavoidable," according to Amrani.

¶18. (C) Amrani asked that the USG also encourage Algeria to have an open dialogue with Morocco on the Western Sahara, because without this there will be no movement towards a solution. Jordan ensured Amrani that he would pass a similar message to the Algerian government. The GOM will propose a "more concrete autonomy plan" in April, according to Amrani.

¶19. (C) MFA Americas Director Tazi noted that the stability of Morocco depends on the rapid solution of the Western Sahara question. Morocco, as he said, can not continue to expend resources, money, and energy on this conflict. Jordan agreed that the conflict has gone on too long, and suggested that Morocco, in addition to focusing on the need to get Algeria involved, must also ensure that a solution is accepted by the Saharawi people. Jordan noted that although there are those who will try to exploit the situation, Morocco must allow as much information as possible to come out of the territory. Not doing so risks the possibility of outsiders concluding that Morocco has something to hide.

¶20. (C) During a February 22 meeting with MFA SecGen Hilale,

Polcouns stressed the importance of Morocco submitting an expanded, credible autonomy plan that could serve as the basis of negotiations with both Algeria and the Polisario. Hilale said Morocco was not starting from scratch on autonomy, echoing Rguibi that some Moroccans were not ready to accept autonomy. Hilale said the Sudan experience was in the back of Morocco's mind; negotiations on a north-south peace arrangement there caused splintering and violence in the west. This demonstrated that even autonomy was a risk for Morocco. That said, Morocco was ready to move forward, but it was high time for the Algerians to engage seriously. Having the parties at the negotiating table would give the Moroccan people a huge psychological boost. Was the Palace consulting with Moroccan political parties and NGOs as the King had asked, Polcouns inquired? Yes, Hilale said, "our people are doing a good job."

¶21. (U) NEA/MAG Director Jordan cleared this message.

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